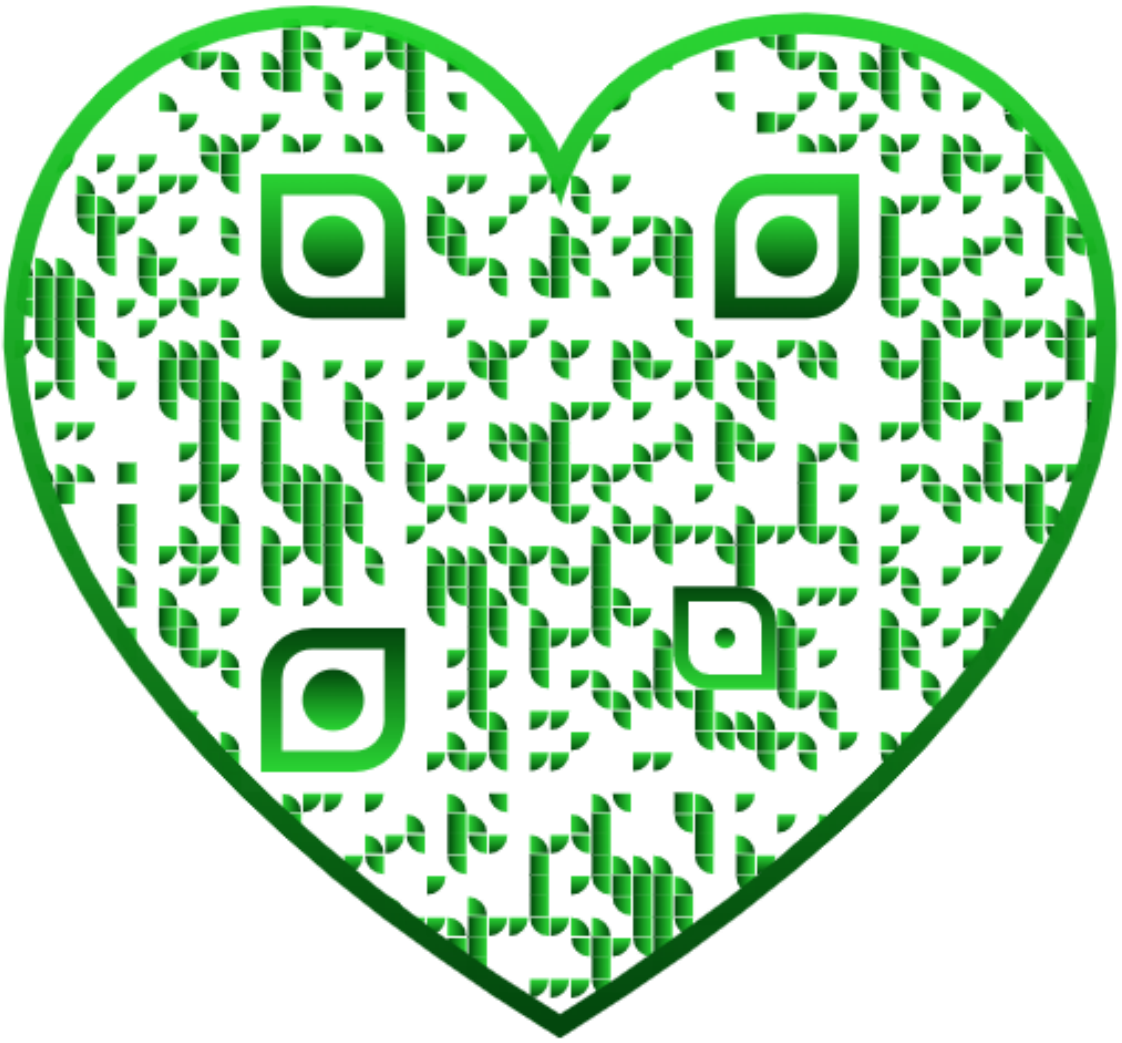
CLASSICS

Most of us view the guitar as a modern-day instrument. We favor rock, blues, jazz, country, and funk, and tend to use flatpicks to get our musical ideas across. Although we'll make occasional forays into unplugged territory, we spend

BY ADAM LEVY

TECHNIQUE

Sharon Isbin's Chops Builders for All Styles



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the majority of our time wired.

Well, here's a news flash: There's another world of guitar—one where the pentatonic scale is not the lingua franca, and whose citizens have never plugged into a plexi Marshall or deified Stevie Ray Vaughan. Welcome to the realm of classical guitar! This rich tradition is centuries old, and you can bet your vintage Tube Screamer that those of us who dwell in Electric Ladyland can benefit from what our foot-stooling forebears have learned.

To help us tap into this timeless wisdom, we asked Sharon Isbin—one of classical guitar's premier performers and teachers—to give us some guidance. Isbin, author of the *Classical Guitar Answer Book* [String Letter Publishing] and director of the guitar departments of the Aspen Music Festival and the Dullard School in New York, provided helpful hints on picking and fretting technique, offered potent practicing tips, and, for good measure, shared her method for memorizing music—a skill that she says is essential for *any* performing musician.

Isbin began with exercises designed to address specific technique problems in each hand. Note: In this lesson, picking-hand digits are notated using the classical *p, i, m, a.* These abbreviations are derived from the Spanish words for thumb (*pulgar*), index (*indicio*), middle (*medio*), and ring (*anular*) fingers, respectively.

Picking Handiwork

"One of the best ways to develop picking-hand technique," says Isbin, "is to work on arpeggio studies. You can start with something simple, such as applying a basic picking pattern to an open-position *Em*, and then repeat the picking pattern in different ways across the strings. This helps you get used to moving across all the strings without being distracted by the fretting hand."

To illustrate, Isbin plays **Ex. 1a**. "This pattern," she explains, "starts on the bottom four strings. You then move your index, middle, and ring fingers to the next-highest string set [measure 2], followed by the thumb [measure 3]. Continue moving your fingers and following them with the thumb [measures 4 and 5]. Finally, descend with *just* the thumb [measures 6 and 7], so you get used to the thumb and fingers being separated—which didn't happen going up. Repeat each measure three times before moving to the next pattern." Take careful note of the picking-finger indications (*p, i, m, a*).

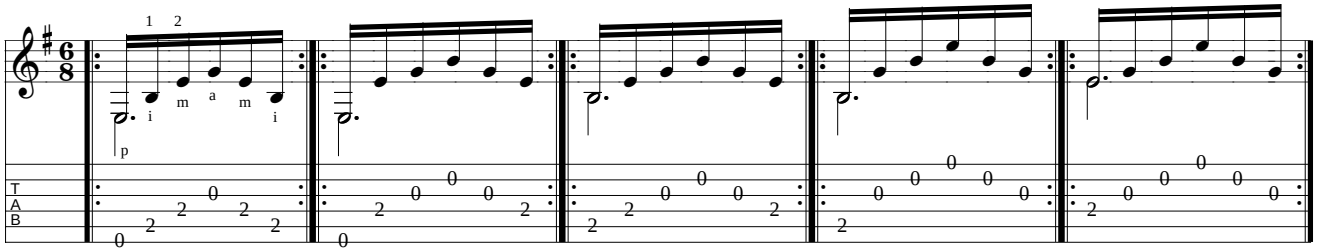
Using the same arpeggio, **Ex. 1b** reverses Ex. 1a's picking pattern. **Ex. 1c** shows a 4/4 variation. "You can invent other patterns," says Isbin. "Any combination of the four picking-hand fingers can work in this exercise."

Stretching Out

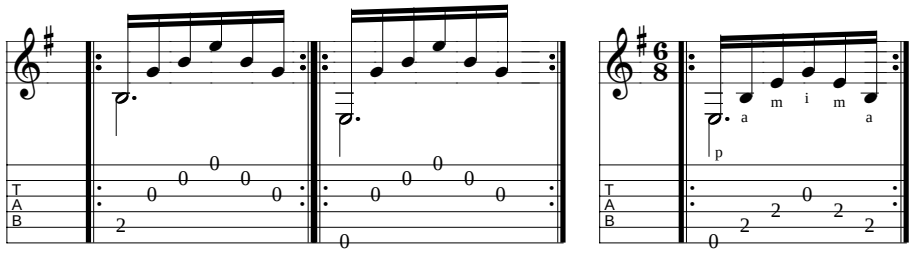
Continuing her focus on the picking hand, Isbin plays the opening two measures of Villa-Lobos' *Etude No. 1* (**Ex. 2a**)—a study favored by intermediate classical players because it isolates the two hands. In this piece, the picking hand gets a great workout—playing the same pattern throughout—while the fretting hand executes a series of gorgeous, full-voiced chords. Arch your fingers so that all the sixteenth-notes ring for the duration of each measure.

If possible, pick up a copy of the complete *Etude No. 1,* and give it a go. In the meantime, work on this excerpt using the right-hand fingerings. Once you've got the passage up to snuff at a moderate tempo, try Isbin's chop-busting variations. "If you're ambitious and want to build tremendous stamina and strength in your picking

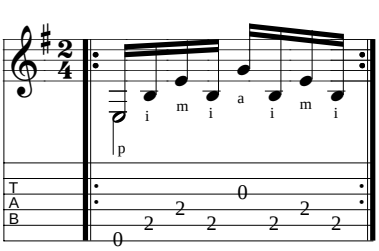
Ex. 1a



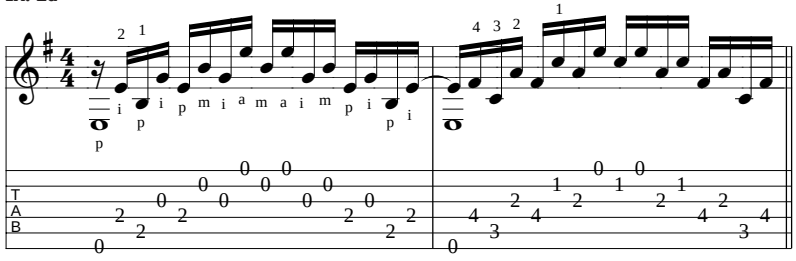
Ex. 1b



Ex. 1c



Ex. 2a



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hand, you could practice the etude using just two fingers at a time," she says. "Try *i-m* [**Ex. 2b**], *i-a*, and *m-a*. That last one is the most difficult, because the middle and ring fingers are connected by a tendon. For a serious challenge, pluck the entire *Etude No. 1* using only your thumb."

Sneaky Slurs

To give our picking hand a rest and focus attention on the fretting hand, Isbin suggests a tricky hammering exercise (**Ex. 3a**). Notice what's happening here—the 1st finger stays anchored at the 1st fret on the first string, while the other pairs of fingers (2-3 and 2-4) slur their way across the five lower strings. Pluck the high *F* with *i* or *a*, and use your thumb (*p*) for all the other notes. "The trick is to keep a perfectly even rhythm," says Isbin, "and play very clear hammer-ons. The goal is to make everything as even as possible."

Isbin then demonstrates several variations. Featuring pull-offs, **Ex. 3b** is a descending version of Ex. 3a. In **Ex. 3c**, anchor your 2nd finger. "Try this ascending and descending, with each finger taking its turn as the anchor," Isbin advises.

Hammers of the Gods

Ex. 4a illustrates another of Isbin's rigorous fretboard drills. This time, *all* the notes are hammered. Once you've tried the exercise as written, work it out in higher positions.

Ex. 4b is the same study, in retrograde. Isbin points out an important detail: "Once a finger has completed its pull-off moves, park it on the next highest string—in this case, the fifth string. By keeping inactive fingers on the adjacent string, while the others continue the exercise, you force your fingers to work independently." Start this one in the fifth position or higher, and work your way down to the first position.

Synchronicity

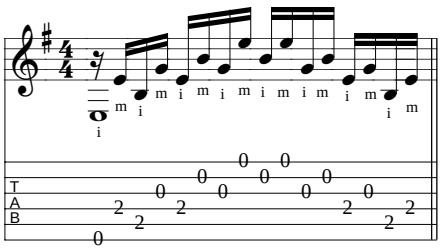
Once you've drilled each hand independently, Isbin says it's time to get them operating together: "Practicing scales gives you a great two-hand workout. I use the scale forms in Andrés Segovia's book, *Diatonic Major and Minor Scales*

Stress-Free Hands

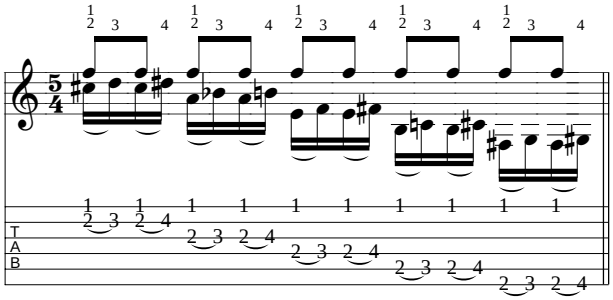
Isbin emphasizes that hand position is the foundation of good technique. "When you have good positions," she says, "there's no tension in either hand. The simplest way to find the best picking-hand position is to drop your arm to your side. Relax completely—let gravity pull your arm. Now lightly bring your arm up, and rest it on the top edge of the instrument. Note where your hand falls over the strings—*that's* your natural position. Make sure to have a nice, gentle arch in the wrist."

As for the fretting hand, Isbin offers these pointers: "Play on your fingertips with a sense of the tips being perpendicular to the neck. Remember that your thumb follows your hand not only horizontally, but vertically. In other words, when you're fretting the first string, your thumb is close to it, and when you're fretting the bass strings, your thumb is

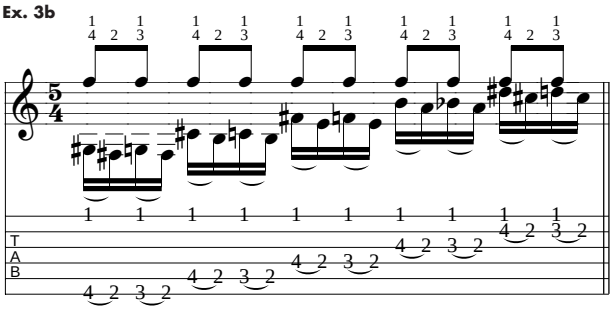
Ex. 2b



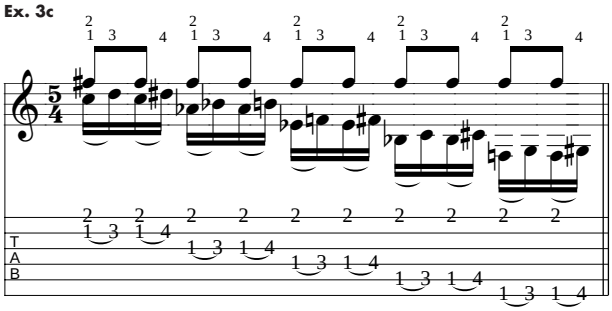
Ex. 3a



Ex. 3b



Ex. 3c



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[Columbia]. If you can only do a few per day, start with a simple form, such as the *C* major scale, then add a couple of tougher ones. A good choice is the *B* minor scale, which goes all the way up the neck."

Isbin demonstrates a *C* major scale, played Segovia-style (**Ex. 5**), and then offers a few picking variations. "You could pick this scale *i-m*, as written, or use any combination of fingers such as *i-a* or *a-m-i*," she says. "Try this using both free strokes and rest strokes."

In a free stroke, the picking finger plucks the string and then moves up toward the palm, avoiding contact with any other strings. In a rest stroke, the picking finger momentarily comes to rest on the next-lowest string. This finger returns to its original position as you make an alternating stroke with a different digit.

"You could also play the scale with all hammer-ons or all pull-offs," elaborates Isbin. "Whatever technique you try, use a metronome for scale practice. It should be set to click once every four notes. Gradually increase the tempo, notch by notch, as your hands get more comfortable with the scale."

Make It Real

After you've got a grip on basic scales and arpeggios, the next step is to explore *music*. "A composition will get both hands working together," says Isbin. "If you're just learning the instrument, try any of the simple studies by Fernando Sor or Mauro Giuliani. Early Renaissance pieces are also good. From there, you can work your way up to more intricate Baroque pieces, such as *Bouree* from J.S. Bach's *Lute Suite in E Minor*."

Mind Games

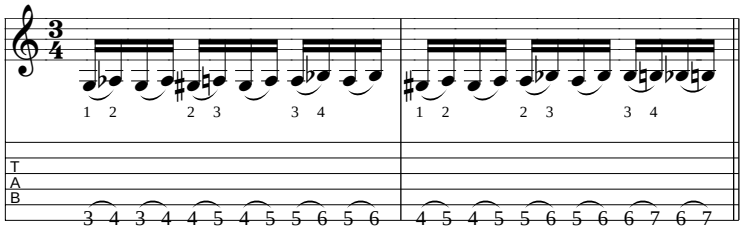
In addition to the technical exercises we've explored, Isbin has some tips for getting past common roadblocks. For example, a rapid scale passage, such as in **Ex. 6a**, can be troublesome. Most teachers would recommend practicing it with a metronome, starting very slowly and gradually increasing speed. Isbin concurs, but offers an unusual spin: "When practicing scale runs, I often use a long/short, long/short dotted rhythm (**Ex. 6b**). I also practice the reverse—short/long, short/long. This forces you to practice all the right- and left-hand shifts—the changes—two notes at a time. Hold the long notes as long as you like, and make the short ones as brief as possible.

"Another approach is to work through the run from its end to the beginning. Play the last two notes, then the last three notes, then the last four notes—and so on—in their correct order. If there's a slur, you have to take the pair together. Of course, you need to work out all your right- and left-hand fingerings ahead of time. It's excellent training to approach a whole piece this way—breaking it up into smaller segments, and working on the segments one note at a time, back to front. Finally, glue all the pieces together. Use a metronome for this, although once you've spent some time working with the metronome, it's important to rehearse *without* it. You don't want to become confined by mechanical time keeping."

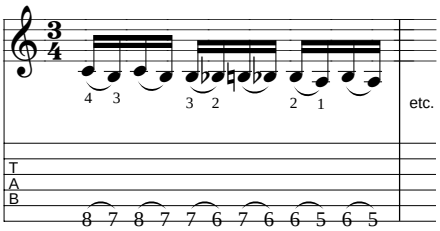
Filling the Databank

Classical guitarists regularly perform long, solo works onstage. Relying on written music and a music stand is both impractical and aesthetically unappealing, so concert guitarists must develop memorization skills. Isbin does most of her memorizing away from the guitar.

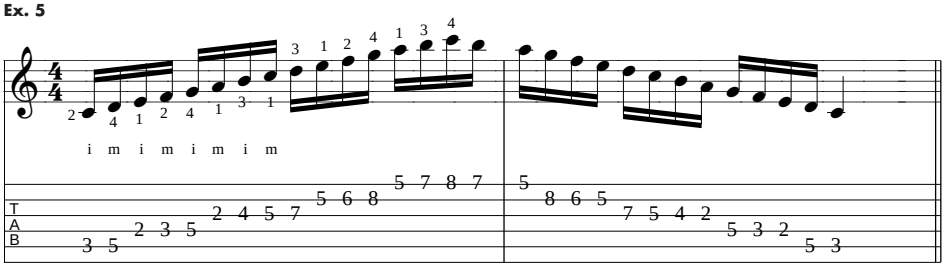
Ex. 4a



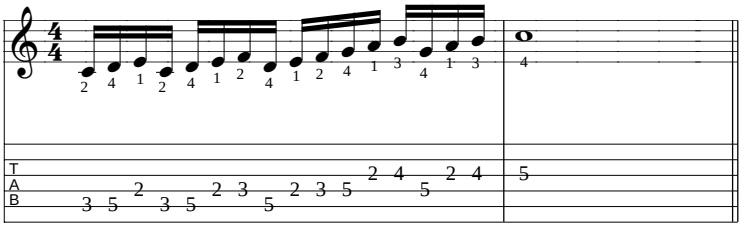
Ex. 4b



Ex. 5



Ex. 6a



Ex. 6b

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"When I'm preparing for a concert," she says, "I'll pace myself so that two weeks before the performance, I'm able to sit down without the instrument, shut my eyes, and hear the piece *exactly* as I wish it to sound. I visualize all the left- and right-hand fingering patterns at tempo. To prepare, I'll rehearse the music in my mind— just as I would if I were rehearsing on the instrument. If there's something in the music that's not clear in my mind, I'll study the problem area with the score on my lap. Once the confusion is cleared up, I'll put the score away, start from the beginning again, and visualize the music until I hit the next fuzzy spot. At that point, I repeat the process. The goal is to be able to go through any piece you're working on without faltering and without looking at the score. If you're preparing for a concert, you can work on the entire program this way. It's great for mental stamina and concentration. It also allows you to form a musical ideal in your head of the phrasing, dynamics, tempo, expression, and voice-leading. You're unencumbered by technique because there's no instrument to hold back your imagination.

"Once I've reached my goal of being able to do this, I'll go through the whole program in my head each day for two weeks. If you're doing a live radio broadcast, or a world premier with an orchestra, you can't afford to make a mistake. This process gives you the assurance that you're 100% prepared. The great thing is that you can practice on a train, a plane, or the subway. If I'm on a five-hour flight, I'll devote at least three hours to this kind of memory work. You can cut down your learning time by *months* with this technique. The average time I'm given to learn a world-premier guitar concerto is one month—sometimes less."

Isbin offers one more key to the memorization process: "When you're programming your mind for a written musical work, it's important to fully comprehend its structure—the phrases, harmony, and all the other components. Imagine that you were memorizing a poem in a foreign language. Through repetition you could phonetically memorize the sounds, but words wouldn't gel in your brain, and your phrasing would be pretty terrible. It's the same with music. If you really want a piece to become part of your mind—and for your mind to be receptive to it—you must *understand* the music."